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ABSTRACT

The relationship between training and the employment of women in the 12 countries of the European Union (EU) was examined. An analysis of the distribution of the female population by training levels revealed that women in the Netherlands, Germany, and Denmark generally had the highest overall levels of training, whereas women in Spain and Portugal generally had the least amount of training. The link between training level and activity rate varied sharply by country: Danish women with a low level of training had a labor market activity rate comparable to that of more highly trained women in Luxembourg. An examination of unemployment rates throughout the EU indicated that, although higher levels of training generally protected women against unemployment, higher levels of training were required to protect women against unemployment in northern Europe than in southern Europe. Women constituted 63%-92% of the labor force with reduced working hours. In the countries of southern Europe, between 7% and 14% of the employed female labor force was involved in part-time work, whereas in the Netherlands, 68.5% of employed women worked part time. The Netherlands, Germany, and Denmark appeared to offer relatively egalitarian access to part-time work. (MN)

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EUROPE IN THE FEMININE: THE UNION OF CONTRASTS

Within similar training structures, women's competences are mobilised differently from one country to another.[1] Conversely, there are similarities concerning the situation of women on the labour market in different countries which correspond to varied conditions of training among these populations. Statistical data from the labour force survey conducted by the European Union's Statistics Office (Eurostat) permits a comparative analysis of this training-employment relationship.[2]

Training Structures: Three Groups of Countries

The economic and social histories of the twelve countries that were members of the European Union in 1994 are extremely varied. The structures of their productive apparatus, as well as their vocational education and training systems have evolved at relatively different paces and with equally varied ways of functioning.

The role of women within these systems is both singular—insofar as it reflects a certain form of the "female condition"—and strongly rooted in each country's employment and training structures. Thus, despite certain constant features in the trends, the situation of women in terms of training and employment is far from similar from one country to another.

The structure of training levels of the female population by country allows three groups to be distinguished (Graph 1):

1. A first group, consisting of Portugal and Spain, is characterised by a high proportion of ISCED levels 0-2 (over 70 %), a slight proportion of ISCED level 3, and a proportion of ISCED levels 5-7 diploma-holders that is also slight but greater than the preceding category.[3]

2. A second group, consisting of the Netherlands, Germany, and Denmark, is characterised by a sharp predominance of ISCED level 3 (48 to 62 %) and fairly similar, low proportions of ISCED levels 0-2 and 5-7.

3. A third group, consisting of Italy, Greece, Luxembourg, Great Britain, Ireland, Belgium and France, is characterised by progressively decreasing proportions from ISCED levels 0-2 to levels 5-7.

These results probably reflect two phenomena. The first corresponds to a common process of access to training among the female population, with Spain and Portugal representing the upstream phase and the countries of the third group representing the downstream phase. A second phenomenon involving Denmark, Germany and the Netherlands suggests that the forms of development correspond to specific cultures, in this instance, alternating training in apprenticeship.

1. This article is based on an earlier version of the same title, in French: "L'Europe au féminin : l'Union des Contrastes." In *Femmes sur le marché du travail : l'autre relation formation-Emploi.* Collection des études no. 70 (Marseilles: Céreq, 1997).

2. All the data used in the article involve subjects between the ages of 25 and 59. This age group was chosen in order to avoid statistical inconsistencies introduced by differences in the rates of continued studies and retirement age from one country to another.

3. ISCED: International Standard Classification of Education.

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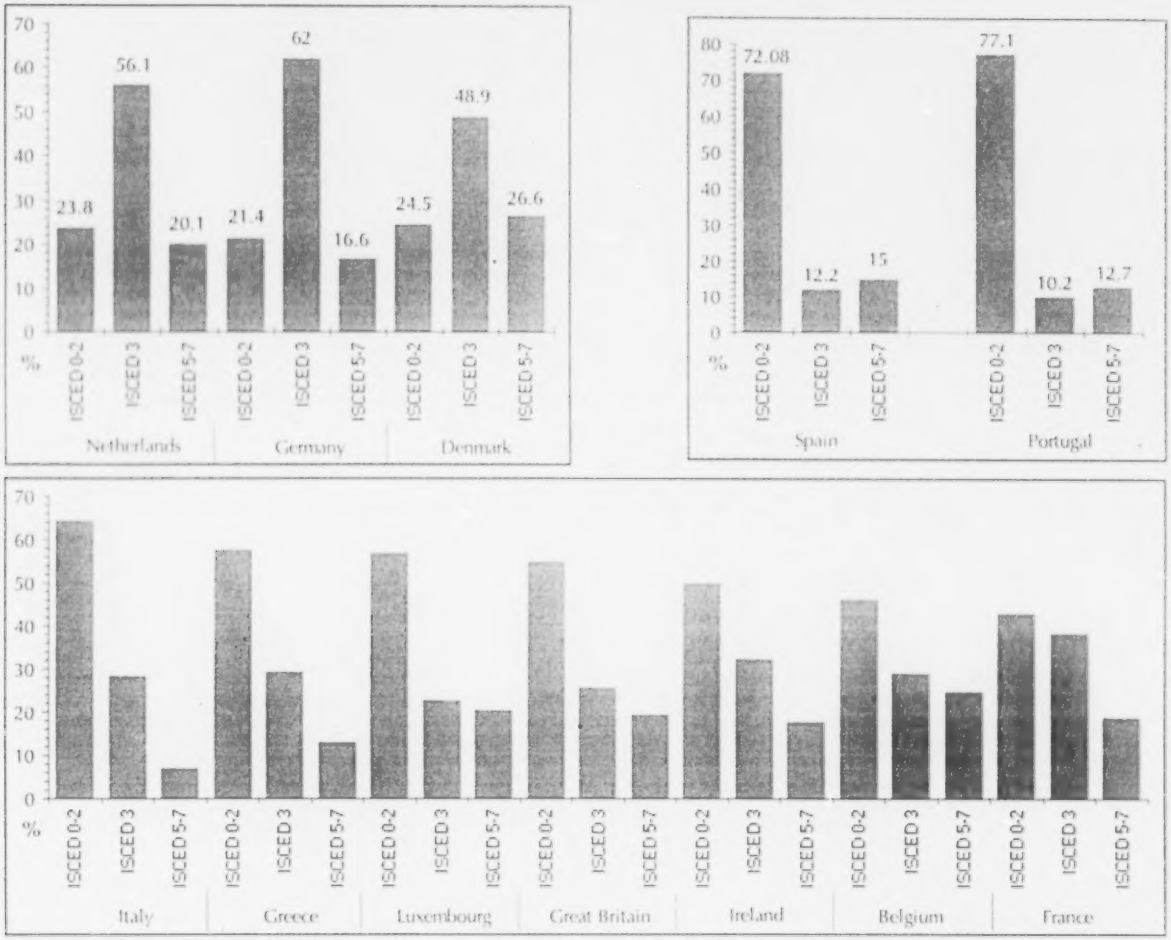
Graph 1. Distribution of the Female Population by Training Levels



Activity and Training

If we examine the link between training level and activity rate, the latter varies sharply by country (Table 1).

Table 1. Percentage of Economically Active Women by Training Levels

COUNTRY	TRAINING LEVELS		
	ISCED 0-2	ISCED 3	ISCED 5-7
Portugal	63.5	81.7	94
Denmark	65.4	82.5	90.5
Great Britain	64.1	77.7	86.7
France	62.4	78.4	85.5
Belgium	44.5	70.1	84.3
Germany	54.2	71.4	84.3
Spain	40.7	68	83
Italy	36.7	67.5	85
Netherlands	42.2	62.3	81.9
Greece	42.7	51.3	80.6
Ireland	34	59.8	80.3
Luxembourg	43.9	59.1	65

The highest activity rates obviously correspond to women with a higher level of education, ISCED 5-7: 80 to 95 percent of those with this level are active (with the exception of Luxembourg, where the proportion is only 65 %). But depending on the country, the activity rates of women with an ISCED level 3 varies considerably—from 51 to 82 percent. In all countries, women with ISCED levels 0-2 are the least active but here the variations are even greater (from 34 to 65 %). In short, there are sharp differences in behaviour among European women: Danish women with a low level of training have an activity rate comparable to that of women in Luxembourg with higher training levels.

A certain dissociation may be observed within the three country training structures. Despite their similar structures, the Spain-Portugal couple breaks down insofar as Portuguese women are always much more active.[4] In this respect, they are similar to the women of Northern Europe. Conversely, Dutch women might be compared to those of Greece, in spite of the vast difference in training structures. Along the same lines, level 3 women present fairly different activity levels in the countries

4. + 20 percent for levels 0-2 and 3, and + 10 percent for levels 5-7.

where this level is preponderant: 82.5 percent of the active women in Denmark, 71.4 percent in Germany and 62.3 percent in the Netherlands. Thus, among countries with the same structure of training levels, there may be considerable differences in the decision to join the workforce. A certain level of training is not necessarily a prerequisite for pursuing an activity; other features of the labour market and female employment play a role, probably along with cultural choices as well.

Unemployment and Training[5]

In general, a close link may be observed between training level and unemployment rate: the higher the training level, the lower the rate of unemployment. There are two exceptions however—Greece and Portugal, where the women of ISCED level 3 show higher unemployment rates than women of the other two levels. In these countries, female employment seems to be concentrated at the two extremes of training, upper and lower.

The protective effect of training varies considerably from one country to another. In comparison with the overall rate of female unemployment (for the same age group), the fact of being at ISCED levels 0-2 most often translates into a greater risk of unemployment. This risk is much higher in Ireland (+8.5 %) and Belgium (+6.9 %); it decreases slightly but remains high in Great Britain (+5.4 %), the Netherlands (+4.8 %), Germany (+4 %), Denmark and France (both +3.8 %).

The contrast between North and South is also strong. Indeed, in Spain, Italy, Portugal, and even more so in Greece, women of ISCED levels 0-2 are not more vulnerable to unemployment than the average. The predominance of this level in the training structure makes it less penalising than elsewhere.

Table 2. Female Unemployment Rates by ISCED Level

COUNTRY	TRAINING LEVELS			ALL WOMEN 25-59 YEARS
	ISCED 0-2	ISCED 3	ISCED 5-7	
Spain	30.3	28.3	20.8	27.8
Ireland	21.6	10.9	5.4	13.1
France	16.5	12.3	6.9	12.7
Italy	13.7	10.5	8.6	11.8
Belgium	17.9	11	4.2	11
Germany	14.8	11.2	7	10.8
Greece	9.5	13.5	7.2	10.1
Denmark	12.7	9.7	4.9	8.9
Netherlands	12.7	7.7	5.5	7.9
Portugal	7.1	9.1	2.4	6.5
Great Britain	11.8	7.9	4.1	6.4

At the other extreme, the fact of being at ISCED levels 5-7 offers relative protection against unemployment. In all countries, the unemployment rate at these levels is below that of the total rate. In decreasing order by country, the differential is as follows: Ireland (-7.7 %), Spain (-7 %), Belgium (-6.8 %), France (-5.8 %), Portugal (-4.1 %), Denmark (-4 %), Germany (-3.8 %), Italy (-3.2 %), Greece (-2.9 %), Netherlands (-2.4 %) and Great Britain (-2.3 %).

Once again, the differences between countries are marked:

- Ireland and Belgium, the two countries where the ISCED levels 0-2 are the most disadvantageous, are also those where the protection granted by levels 5-7 is the strongest. The training investment there is highly "profitable" (if not indispensable), notably in the context of a high overall rate of unemployment.

- Conversely, in Great Britain and the Netherlands, the relative protection obtained by ISCED levels 5-7 is slight, even though women at levels 0-2 are among those with the greatest comparative risk of unemployment. The investment in training is only slightly rewarded, but non-investment is clearly sanctioned. These two countries are among those where the overall unemployment rate is the lowest.

In the majority of the countries, the fact of being at ISCED level 3 carries a risk close to the average. Four countries constitute exceptions, however:

- Greece (+3.4 %), Portugal (+2.6 %), and Great Britain (+1.5 %), where it is necessary to have higher training in order to enjoy a relative protection;

- Ireland (-2.2 %), where the opposite is true: training leads to real protection, regardless of the level.

The extent to which training protects against unemployment thus varies greatly from one country to another. Even if, at first glance, common trends seem to emerge, the differences do not permit any conclusions to be drawn about the "status of women" in Europe.

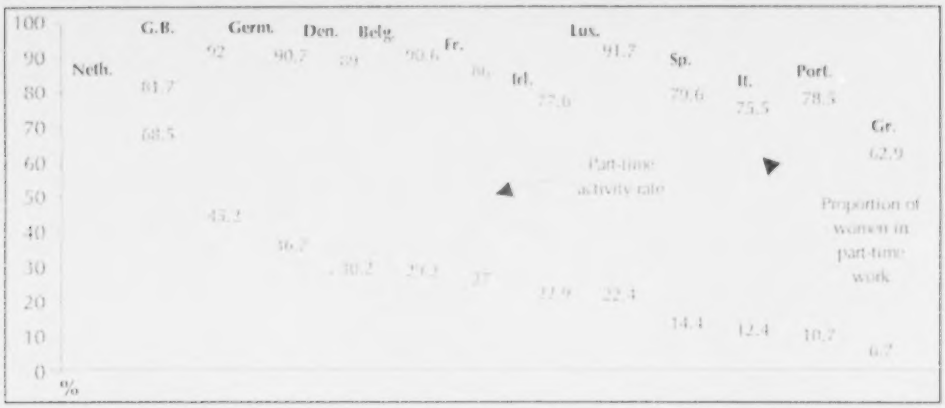
Part-Time Employment and Training Level

Part-time work is female. Women constitute between 63 and 92 percent of the labour force having reduced working hours. But if this observation appears to bring European women together, it must be qualified by the part-time employment rate, which, as Graph 2 shows, varies between 6.7 percent (Greece) and 68.5 percent (Netherlands).[6] Thus, the trend toward part-time work is essentially female, but the tendency of women to hold this kind of job varies sharply from one country to another.

5. The statistics and comments that follow do not include Luxembourg. Because of the low number of persons involved, data concerning this country are not significant.

6. Percentage of women working part time in relation to the active female labour force.

Graph 2. Part-Time Employment: Activity Rate and Proportion of Women



In fact, part-time work differentiates Northern and Southern Europe:

- In the countries of the South (Greece, Portugal, Italy, Spain), part-time work involves a minority of the employed female labour force (7 to 14 %).

- At the other extreme, in the Netherlands, the large majority of female employment (68.5 %) is part time.

- In Great Britain, Germany, Denmark, Belgium, France, and Luxembourg, part-time work affects a variable proportion of the employed female population (22-45 %), but it remains essentially female (about 90 %). The variations among these different countries are thus considerable. They clearly reflect the country's production and employment structure, which encourages and/or permits a greater or lesser possibility of creating part-time jobs.

- Ireland constitutes a case apart, with a part-time female labour-force rate (22.9 %) close to certain countries in the preceding group (North) but a rate of feminisation of part-time jobs approaching the situation of the countries of Southern Europe (77.6 %).

Overall, the structure of female part-time work by training levels reproduces that of the female labour force between the ages of 25 and 59 for the same levels, but the gaps vary from country to country.[7]

In the Netherlands, Germany and Denmark, the proportion of the different training levels in part-time work is close to the proportion that each level occupies in the labour force except for the higher levels, which are less present (-3 to -5 %). As a result, more than half (53 to 59 %) of the women working part time are ISCED level 3. Thus, it cannot be concluded that one level or another has a greater propensity for part-time work (with the exception of a slight negative trend for the higher levels).

In Spain and Portugal, part-time work accentuates the predominance of low levels of training. The part-time labour force is overwhelmingly ISCED level 0-2 (73 and 90 %, respectively), and the proportion of this level within part-time work is considerably higher (+20 %) than the proportion it occupies in the female labour force. On the other hand, the proportion of ISCED levels 5-7 in part-time work is much lower than their proportion in the female labour force (-14 to -15 %).

In the other seven countries, we can observe an over-representation of women classified at ISCED levels 0-2 in part-time work and an under-representation of those classified at levels 5-7 and at level 3 (even though this level represents the majority of the female labour force in the cases of France and Ireland).

The Netherlands, Germany and Denmark thus seem to offer relatively egalitarian access to part-time work, and it would appear that the organisation of female work has been arranged to this end. In the other countries, holding a part-time job selectively involves the least skilled, which leads to the conclusion that this is probably the result of a constraint linked to the jobs rather than a choice of the people holding them, and that the nature of the jobs themselves is certainly different.

For most European publications describing a comparative analysis of the dynamic of women's labour-market participation in Europe, there is still a great temptation to stop at examinations of trends. This carries the risk of hiding significant gaps which have been emphasized here. There is no specifically female form of labour-market involvement. An approach through country training structures might have allowed similar forms to be identified, but that was not the case. Country-specific features of labour markets, employment structures and organisation of work go beyond possible specificities of female employment. Europe in the feminine is indeed the Union of Contrasts.

Annie Bouder, Céreq

7. This data is presented in the article published in the article cited above, n. 1.

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